

City of York Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The City of York Council operates its fostering services through two teams that are part of the Learning, Culture and Children's Services department. The Family Placement team recruits families to work with children who are looked after by the local authority. The Sharing Care team recruits families who offer short term breaks for children with disabilities. All the carers are approved to act as foster carers, including kinship carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

The purpose of this visit was to undertake an unannounced key inspection. Outcome areas for being healthy, staying safe, enjoy and achieve, positive contribution, achieving economic wellbeing and organisation were assessed and outstanding recommendations from the previous inspection were checked for compliance.

Children and young people experience security, stability and good outcomes in the care of York City Fostering. The fostering service has substantial strengths and a sustained track record. Key national minimum standards are met and in several cases exceeded. The safety and well-being of children and young people is effectively promoted. Education has a high priority and there is support and encouragement for healthy lifestyles.

Foster carers provide nurturing homes and offer children and young people a chance to experience positive attachments and stability. Short break carers work effectively alongside parents to offer continuity of care to children and young people with disability.

Corporate parenting is taken seriously across the service and there is successful collaborative working with partner agencies. Young people benefit from innovative practice that supports them through the leaving care process and beyond.

There is a highly committed and experienced management team who ensure that the fostering service is organised and managed in a way that delivers the best possible care and safeguarding to children and young people. Supervising social workers are equipped with the skills, competences and understanding needed for the task of supporting foster carers.

Some breaches of regulation are identified in relation to the operation of the fostering panel, recruitment and the placement of children. Although largely procedural they impact on the additional safeguarding measures afforded to children

and young people. A good practice recommendation is also raised with regard to the monitoring of the activities of the fostering service.

During the course of this inspection the provider took prompt action to address these shortfalls and ensure continued quality performance.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection three good practice recommendations were made. These were to ensure that before a placement begins the carer is provided with a full description of the health needs of the child and that training is accessible to all carers. A third recommendation was made that fostering panels are thorough and rigorous in their approach to decision making. Evidence from this inspection demonstrates that these recommendations are now met.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The promotion of health and well-being of children and young people is outstanding. All children and young people entering mainstream fostering receive a comprehensive health assessment and are registered with primary health care services.

Foster carers receive easily understandable basic health information in the form of health action plans. These detail how specific and general health issues are to be addressed and includes the involvement of children and young people wherever appropriate. Appropriate medical consents are obtained in order that foster carers are able to act quickly to assist the well-being of children and young people.

Parents remain central to the promotion of the health needs of children and young people receiving short breaks. Sharing (short break) carers work closely with parents to ensure that health care is managed in a way that safeguards the needs of the children and young people with additional health needs. Training is provided so that carers are able to correctly administer any treatment needed. One sharing carer noted that 'specialist advice and training has been provided on autism and epilepsy'.

Children and young people with additional health care needs are supported by sharing carers who work closely with a designated nurse and specialists such as occupational therapists. There are strong links with the Acute Trust and Primary Care Trust. Children and young people with additional health needs have open access on to the children's ward at York Hospital, which sharing carers can access if necessary.

Particular health needs which may impact on future outcomes are identified at the earliest opportunity. Securing the good psychological and emotional health of children and young people is seen as a priority. There are strong links to the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Team who provide frequent consultation and advice to children and young people and foster carers.

Health promotion material, support and advice is available on a range of issues such as healthy eating, contraception, smoking and drug and alcohol use. Children and young people are encouraged to eat a balanced diet and the fostering service also meets the needs of those with specific dietary requirements. One young person noted that 'my foster mum always wants me to eat fruit and veg'.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people are cared for by foster carers who provide safe and nurturing environments, and who are fully conversant with the needs of the child. One young person commented 'I feel cared for because I get a great life, going on holidays every year and they buy me lovely clothes. They spoil me rotten!'. Another young person noted 'they are always kind and considerate and help me when I need it'.

Good quality foster placements and staff who are suitably experience, qualified and skilled in their roles means that children and young people are safe in foster care. Prospective carers undergo rigorous assessment, and appropriate checks are undertaken before children and young people are placed. Each fostering household has a safe caring agreement.

The fostering service has safeguarding procedures in place, which are supported by training and qualification opportunities for foster carers and staff. Any allegations against foster carers are promptly and thoroughly investigated and the service keeps a record of such incidents.

Advice and guidance is provided to help carers understand and manage children and young people's behaviour in safe and appropriate ways. If young people abscond from foster care the Young Runaways Interview Review Form can be used to establish why they have run away and if there are any underlying child protection concerns.

Children and young people are confident of who to turn to if they have a problem. One young person noted 'I can speak to my foster family and my birth family. I can also speak to my social worker, my teacher as well'. Information on bullying is available to carers and children and young people. One young person reported 'I do not get bullied because I have a caring teacher who helps and foster carers who give me advice. I have great friends!' Birth parents and carers are made aware of the formal complaints procedure and any complaints are promptly responded to.

The low numbers of disrupted placements, discussion with foster carers and survey feedback demonstrates that carers are very well matched to children placed. A process of matching does take place at the point of referral, but the documentation used is not entirely compliant with the good practice recommendations. Although, in general, permission is sought for variations these cases do not return promptly to

panel. This means that children and young people are sometimes placed with carers outside of the carers terms of approval.

A comprehensive recruitment and selection process ensures that in the majority of cases staff undergo rigorous background checks before starting work in the fostering service. This includes an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check for every staff member and referees are contacted to validate their references. The safety of children and young people is undermined, however, as prospective employees are not routinely asked to declare gaps in their employment history, and the interview process has not picked up this shortfall in practice.

Some elements of unsatisfactory practice in the operation of foster panel means that the safety and well-being of children and young people is compromised. For example, the foster panel is on occasion not quorate and reasons for recommendations are not recorded.

In other respects, the foster panel functions well and in general acts as an important safeguarding mechanism. The foster panel provides a quality assurance function in relation to the quality of assessments and ensures that the fullest information is presented to panel. Any outstanding information is brought promptly to the next panel meeting. Foster panel members are suitably checked and independent members include a care-experienced individual, as well as those with expertise in health and education.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people receive services that fully promote equality and value diversity. The fostering service achieves this in several ways. It ensures that, where necessary, documents, such as statutory review minutes, are translated so that young people can understand them. Foster carers can access a language line, and disability, equality and equal opportunity training is available.

One sharing carer noted that the service is 'particularly good in promoting the rights, choices and independence of young people with disabilities'. The children's guide, review consultation forms and review outcomes are available in pictorial form, and plans for children and young people with additional health needs are written in the first person. The fostering service supports young people to enjoy and express their faith by enabling them to attend places of worship and to go on pilgrimage.

There is a strong emphasis on keeping children and young people within the local community, which helps to reinforce a sense of belonging and identity. Children and young people's identity needs are explored throughout the assessment, planning and review process in general, and in life story work in particular.

The fostering service gives a high priority to meeting the educational needs of children and young people, and in doing so promotes inclusion. Systems are in place

to ensure that all children and young people have their educational needs assessed, planned for and reviewed. Personal education plans are in place for the majority of children and young people.

Children and young people benefit from highly effective partnership working and support between the fostering service and colleagues in education. For example, an educational psychologist is available to provide specific advice to foster carers, and all local schools have designated looked after children teachers. Joint working with stakeholders in education and health means that any barriers and obstacles to the achievement and enjoyment of children and young people with additional health needs are identified and removed.

The fostering service keeps information on the progress and attainment of children and young people in foster care and demonstrates the numbers excluded from school. Multi-agency meetings between social care, youth offending and education colleagues helps to identify those young people for whom education is in drift, and find solutions.

Children and young people benefit from excellent practical help and support to enable them to achieve their academic potential throughout their educational careers. One carer commented that the fostering service 'has made sure the children attend nursery and pre-school sessions'. A young person noted 'I have a laptop to help me. If I get stuck with my homework my carers help me'. The service is ambitious for young people to move on to further and higher education and there are good links with local colleges and universities to facilitate this.

The education of children and young people with additional health needs remains the primary responsibility of parents. There is close liaison, however, between parents and sharing carers that ensures seamless support and good exchange of information. With parental consent, sharing carers are encouraged to observe children and young people at school. One short break carer noted that 'our link worker has been helpful at ensuring we are included in school reviews'.

Children and young people enjoy a wide range of hobbies and leisure activities. Going on holiday at home and abroad, horse riding, bowling and swimming are just some of the many examples of this. Carers were unanimous in their appreciation for the 'Max' card. One short break carer noted that 'it is excellent at promoting opportunities to learn whilst having a fun day out'.

The short break, or Sharing Care, scheme is highly evaluated by parents. Sharing carers are very much included in the service, with access to training and meetings, and plenty of support from link workers. 'When I need the Sharing Care team I can always talk to someone and they reply to emails'. One parent noted 'we can't praise them enough. All have been fantastic in their attitude and support'.

Some sharing carers have been supported to develop particular expertise in order to provide specialist care. This enables children and young people with more complex health needs to be cared for in a domestic home rather than in a hospital.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Establishing, maintaining an developing contact with friends and family is integral to the service provided. Children and young people are supported to maintain family contact and friendships where this is safe to do so. They confirm in their surveys that their views and wishes are taken into account when contact arrangements are planned.

Foster carers understand the importance of contact and support children and young people, often facilitating contact in a practical way. They confirm that they are clear about the need to report any concerns about the adverse effects that can happen occasionally during parental contact sessions.

Consultation between the fostering service and children and young people is outstanding. Children and young people are provided with frequent opportunities for dialogue and consultation with elected members and senior management.

Things change as a result of consultation, and children and young people are directly involved in shaping services. For example, young people expressed their wish for more opportunity to remain with foster carers after the age of 18. The fostering service subsequently bid and is now operating a successful Staying Put pilot so that young people can remain with foster carers until they are ready for independent living. This means that weight is given to young people's views about the timing of moves to independence from their final care placement.

Children and young people are encouraged to participate and are fully involved, where appropriate, with the decision-making processes about their day to day lives and future plans. In response to the survey question 'do your carers listen to you and take notice of your opinions?' one young person commented: 'They always listen to me when I have something to say and explain whatever I ask them.'

A children's rights officer provides information, support, guidance and advocacy where necessary, and consultation with children and young people is incorporated into this role. Children and young people are encouraged and supported to participate in their statutory reviews. The independent reviewing officers monitor how children and young people have contributed to their reviews, and feed this back to managers. User-friendly consultation forms are available for all children and young people, including those receiving sharing care.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

There is outstanding support for young people in preparing for adulthood. There are opportunities for all children and young people to develop independence skills at

some level, commensurate with their age and abilities. One young person noted 'I get helped by my foster carers and at school - they teach me some things about when I grow up'.

Young people preparing to move to independence or semi-independence are helped to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for adult living and independent life. They are consulted about their future and encouraged to be actively involved in decision-making processes and the implementation of pathway plans. The Sharing Care team works alongside parents and a newly established Transitions Team that ensures plans are in place for young people with additional health needs to prepare for adult life.

Pathway plans ensure that young people receive excellent advice and support with financial and housing issues, as well as with basic practical skills, such as budgeting, maintaining tenancies and dealing with external agencies. There is a very good range of services set up to support care leavers. For example, the establishment of the education, training and employment officer has enhanced targeted support for young leaving or preparing to leave care.

The leaving care service is regularly in touch with care leavers until they are 21 years of age, or 25 if they are in higher education or the armed services. Lines of communication are also kept open for very vulnerable individuals, such as those coming out of prison.

York City Fostering is, however, reluctant to relinquish its care of young people. The Staying Put project is exemplary in providing a model whereby young care leavers are 'enabled to build on and nurture their attachments so that they can move to independence at their own pace, and be supported to make the transition to adulthood in a more gradual way, just like other young people who rely on their families'.

There are also opportunities for young people to sample independent living with access to taster flats before completely leaving the care of the service. This means that there is continued support from foster carers throughout this period and the opportunity to return to the foster home if things do not work out. If young people do, however, choose to move to full independence, there are effective links with local housing agencies and designated housing opportunities specifically for care leavers.

Social inclusion is promoted throughout these processes and there is a determination not to allow care leavers to become absorbed by the benefits culture. Support and encouragement is provided to young people to enter employment, and funding available for those wanting to attend college and university.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The statement of purpose provides a good range of information about the fostering service and is reviewed and amended when necessary. This enables children and young people and their families to know what they can expect from the fostering service and how they will be cared for. The children's guide is written in a child friendly format and includes information on bullying and how to make a complaint.

The fostering service is managed effectively that means that children and young people experience positive outcomes. The fostering manager has a wealth of experience and is supported by a senior practitioner. The Sharing Care team is managed separately and has equally competent management. Both teams operate within an integrated placement service with clear lines of accountability. Senior managers provide clear strong leadership to the staff team regarding the aims and objectives of the service.

The excellent practice found at this inspection is compromised by the lack of systematic monitoring of the fostering service. Consequently there is no oversight of some administrative functions that have led to the breaches of regulation identified in this inspection. It also means that managers have been unaware of some of the gaps in good practice, such as unannounced visits to foster carers.

Supervising social workers are supported in their roles through individual supervision and team meetings. There are opportunities for development that encourage staff to stay with the service, and good use is made of the individual skills and interests of staff in the fostering service. Staff have access to a large range of policies and procedures to provide guidance to all aspects of their work. One stakeholder commented that 'the service is supported and managed by a very competent and committed family placement team'.

Children and young people are looked after by foster carers, who have the skills, competences and understanding they need for the task of caring for those in the care system. Foster carers confirm they are very well-supported by the fostering service and that there is effective communication with supervising social workers.

All foster carers are supplied with a comprehensive handbook and access to relevant training opportunities. One sharing carer noted the 'excellent access to courses and good advice and support through regular contact with my link worker'. A number of carers have completed, or are in the process of completing, the Children's Workforce Development Council programme.

A recruitment strategy is in place to ensure that the service has sufficient numbers of carers to meet the needs of children and young people. Prospective carers are subject to a comprehensive assessment procedure and scrutiny by the foster panel before being recommended for approval.

The fostering service is sensitive to pre-existing relationships in assessing and approving family and friends as foster carers. Kinships assessments are brought to panel within statutory timescales. This ensures that the needs of children and young people are promoted by kinship networks wherever possible. Kinship carers are supported in the same way as any other carer and with similar expectations.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Equality and diversity is fully embraced as part of the culture of the service. The diverse, individual needs of children and young people are considered at the earliest stage alongside any needs relating to disability, culture and ethnicity. Carers receive good support for trans-racial placements. Strong collaborative working relationships between the fostering service and education, health and other key agencies. Training for foster carers and staff also reflects the commitment to equality and diversity.

Case records are in good order, methodically and systematically arranged, where they exist in hard copy, and containing all essential information on electronic systems. This ensures that children and young people have a permanent record of their history. Systems are in place to provide good administrative support to the fostering service, and significant information about children and young people is kept safe and secure.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that foster placement agreements are provided that contain specific reference to elements of matching which were taken into consideration in agreeing the placement and identify any areas where foster carers need additional support to compensate for any gaps in the match between the child and carer (NMS 8.4)
- ensure that all panel business is conducted by a fostering panel that is quorate and that all reasons for recommendations are recorded (breach of regulation 25 (1) and (2))
- place a child with foster parents only if the terms of his approval are consistent with the proposed placement (breach of regulation 34 (1) (b))
- ensure that there is satisfactory written explanation of any gaps in employment history (breach of regulation 5 (30) (c) (i))
- implement procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the fostering service and ensuring quality performance (NMS 4.1)